

Elder D. Todd Christofferson

Doctrine of the redemption of the dead

Christian theologians have long wrestled with the question, What is the destiny of the countless billions who have lived and died with no knowledge of Jesus?¹ With the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ has come the understanding of how the unbaptized dead are redeemed and how God can be “a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.”²

While yet in life, Jesus prophesied that He would also preach to the dead.³ Peter tells us this happened in the interval between the Savior’s Crucifixion and Resurrection.⁴ President Joseph F. Smith witnessed in vision that the Savior visited the spirit world and “from among the righteous [spirits] . . . organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness. . . . These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, [and] the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands.”⁵

The doctrine that the living can provide baptism and other essential ordinances to the dead, vicariously, was revealed anew to the Prophet Joseph Smith.⁶ He learned that the spirits awaiting resurrection are not only offered individual salvation but that they can be bound in heaven as husband and wife and be sealed to their fathers and mothers of all generations past and have sealed to them their children of all generations future. The Lord instructed the Prophet that these sacred rites are appropriately performed only in a house built to His name—a temple.⁷

The principle of vicarious service should not seem strange to any Christian. In the baptism of a living person, the officiator acts, by proxy, in place of the Savior. And is it not the central tenet of our faith that Christ’s sacrifice atones for our

sins by vicariously satisfying the demands of justice for us? As President Gordon B. Hinckley has expressed:

“I think that vicarious work for the dead more nearly approaches the vicarious sacrifice of the Savior Himself than any other work of which I know. It is given with love, without hope of compensation, or repayment or anything of the kind. What a glorious principle.”⁸

Some have misunderstood and suppose that deceased souls “are being baptised into the Mormon faith without their knowledge”⁹ or that “people who once belonged to other faiths can have the Mormon faith retroactively imposed on them.”¹⁰ They assume that we somehow have power to force a soul in matters of faith. Of course, we do not. God gave man his agency from the beginning.¹¹ “The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God,”¹² but only if they accept those ordinances. The Church does not list them on its rolls or count them in its membership.

Our anxiety to redeem the dead, and the time and resources we put behind that commitment, are, above all, an expression of our witness concerning Jesus Christ. It constitutes as powerful a statement as we can make concerning His divine character and mission. It testifies, first, of Christ’s Resurrection; second, of the infinite reach of His Atonement; third, that He is the sole source of salvation; fourth, that He has established the conditions for salvation; and fifth, that He will come again.

The power of Christ’s Resurrection

As regards the Resurrection, Paul asked, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?”¹³ We are baptized for the dead because we know that they will rise. “The

soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame.”¹⁴ “For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.”¹⁵

It matters tremendously what we do in relation to those who have gone before, because they live today as spirits and shall live again as immortal souls, and that because of Jesus Christ. We believe His words when He said, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”¹⁶ By the baptisms we perform in behalf of the dead, we testify that “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. . . . For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”¹⁷

The infinite reach of Christ’s Atonement

By identifying our ancestors and performing for them the saving ordinances they could not themselves perform, we are testifying of the infinite reach of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Christ “died for all.”¹⁸ “He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”¹⁹

“God is no respecter of persons:

“But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”²⁰

“Doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, buy milk and honey, without money and without price.”²¹

Our Lord “ inviteth . . . all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen;

and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”²²

It is inconceivable that this invitation, universally extended in life, would be rescinded for those who had not heard it before they died. With Paul, we are persuaded that death poses no such obstacle: “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”²³

Christ is the sole source of salvation

Our anxiety to ensure that our kindred dead are offered baptism in Jesus’ name is testament to the fact that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” and that “no man cometh unto the Father, but by [Him].”²⁴ Peter proclaimed:

“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”²⁵

“There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”²⁶

Some contemporary Christians, concerned for the billions who have died without a knowledge of Jesus Christ, have begun to wonder if there truly is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”²⁷ To believe that Jesus is the only savior, they say, is arrogant, narrow-minded, and intolerant. We say, however, that this is a false dilemma. There is no injustice in there being but One through whom salvation may come, when that One and His salvation are offered to every soul, without exception. We need not tamper with the doctrine or temper the good news of Christ.

Conditions of salvation set by Christ

Because we believe that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, we also accept His au-

thority to establish the conditions by which we may receive His grace. Otherwise we would not concern ourselves with being baptized for the dead.

Jesus confirmed that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life."²⁸ Specifically, He said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."²⁹ This means we must "repent, and be baptized every one . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and . . . receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."³⁰

Notwithstanding He was sinless, Jesus Christ Himself was baptized and received the Holy Ghost to witness "unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments"³¹ and to show us "the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which [we] should enter, he having set the example before [us]." And He said, "He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do."³²

There are no exceptions granted; none are needed. As many as will believe and be baptized—including by proxy—and endure in faith shall be saved, "not only those who believed after [Christ] came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came."³³ It is for this reason that the gospel is preached "also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."³⁴

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

Our work for the dead bears witness that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth. In the final verses of the Old Testament, Jehovah declared:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:

"And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."³⁵

In an inspired commentary on this scripture, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "The earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other—and behold what is that subject? It is the baptism for the dead."³⁶

The vicarious ordinances we perform in temples, beginning with baptism, make possible an eternal welding link between generations that fulfills the purpose of the earth's creation. Without this, "the whole earth would be utterly wasted at [Christ's] coming."³⁷ Elijah has, in fact, come as promised to confer the priesthood power that turns hearts and establishes the welding links between the fathers and the children so that once again what is bound on earth "shall be bound in heaven."³⁸ When he came, Elijah declared, "The keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands; and by this ye may know that the great and dreadful day of the Lord is near, even at the doors."³⁹

We are anxiously about the task of searching out our fathers and mothers of generations past and binding them to us and us to them. Is not this the strongest possible evidence of our conviction that Jesus Christ will come again to reign upon the earth? We know He will, and we know what He expects we will have done in preparation for His return.

The dead will be redeemed

In the scriptures, the spirits of the dead are sometimes referred to as being in darkness or in prison.⁴⁰ Contemplating God's glorious plan for the redemption of these, His children, the Prophet Joseph Smith penned this psalm:

"Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth

into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free."⁴¹

Our charge extends as far and as deep as the love of God to encompass His children of every time and place. Our efforts on behalf of the dead bear eloquent witness that Jesus Christ is the divine Redeemer of all mankind. His grace and promises reach even those who in life do not find Him. Because of Him, the prisoners shall indeed go free. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. See John Sanders, introduction to *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Un-evangelized*, by Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders (1995), 9. There are several theories concerning the "un evangelized" dead, ranging from an inexplicable denial of salvation, to dreams or other divine intervention at the moment of death, to salvation for all, even without faith in Christ. A few believe that souls hear of Jesus after death. None explain how to satisfy Jesus' requirement that a man must be born of water and spirit to enter the kingdom of God (see John 3:3–5). Lacking the knowledge once had in the early Church, these earnest seekers have been "forced to choose between a weak law that allow[s] the unbaptized to enter heaven, and a cruel God who damn[s] the innocent" (Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* [1987], 101).
2. Alma 42:15.
3. See John 5:25.
4. See 1 Peter 3:18–19.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 138:30, 33.
6. See Doctrine and Covenants 124; 128; 132; *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (1984), 486; *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (1991), 49.
7. See *Doctrine and Covenants* 124:29–36. Today's expansive construction of temples across the world has as one of its primary purposes to provide the place where ordinances essential to salvation may be performed for those who, in life, were not privileged to receive them.
8. "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, Jan. 1998, 73.
9. Ben Fenton, "Mormons Use Secret British War Files 'to Save Souls,'" *Telegraph* (London), 15 Feb. 1999.
10. Greg Stott, "Ancestral Passion," *Equinox*, April/May 1998, 45.
11. See Moses 7:32; see also Alma 5:33–36; 42:27.
12. *Doctrine and Covenants* 138:58.
13. 1 Corinthians 15:29.
14. Alma 40:23.
15. Romans 14:9.
16. John 11:25.
17. 1 Corinthians 15:22, 25–26.
18. 2 Corinthians 5:15.
19. 1 John 2:2.
20. Acts 10:34–35.
21. 2 Nephi 26:25.
22. 2 Nephi 26:33.
23. Romans 8:38–39.
24. John 14:6.
25. Acts 4:12; see also 2 Nephi 25:20; Mosiah 5:8.
26. 1 Timothy 2:5.
27. Ephesians 4:5. See, for example, John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), 180.
28. Matthew 7:14.
29. John 3:5.
30. Acts 2:38.
31. 2 Nephi 31:7; see also Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34.
32. 2 Nephi 31:9, 12.
33. *Doctrine and Covenants* 20:26.
34. 1 Peter 4:6.
35. Malachi 4:5–6; see also 3 Nephi 25:5–6; *Doctrine and Covenants* 2.
36. *Doctrine and Covenants* 128:18.
37. *Doctrine and Covenants* 2:3; Joseph Smith—History 1:39.

38. Matthew 16:19; see also Matthew 18:18; Doctrine and Covenants 132:46.
39. Doctrine and Covenants 110:16.
40. See Isaiah 24:22; 1 Peter 3:19; Alma 40:12–13; Doctrine and Covenants 38:5; 138:22, 30. Even the righteous spirits are spoken of as faithful “captives” awaiting deliverance from the bands of death (see D&C 138:18–19).
41. Doctrine and Covenants 128:22.

Elder Alexander B. Morrison

Very early in Jesus' ministry, two disciples came to Him and asked, "Master, . . . where dwellest thou?" Jesus' brief yet profound reply, "Come and see," provides the basis for my few poor remarks today (John 1:38–39).

Seek to know the Savior

"Come and see," come seeking to know Him, and I promise you will find Him and see Him in His true character as the risen, redeeming Savior of the world. "Come and see," and you will recognize Him as the Christ of the empty sepulchre, the conqueror of Calvary, who broke the bands of death and rose triumphant from the tomb to bring immortality to all and eternal life to the faithful. He is the "lamb without blemish and without spot," foreordained in His messianic role "before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19–20). "He was wounded for our transgressions [and] bruised for our iniquities: . . . with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

He will heal and strengthen you

"Come and see," and in your coming lay your burdens at His feet. Give away all your sins that you might see and know Him (see Alma 22:18). "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden," He said, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me . . . and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

Come unto Him, and He will take away your sins and heal your soul, though

it be sick with sin. He will replace hatred with love and selfishness with service. He will strengthen your shoulders to better bear your burdens and give you new courage and hope for the journey ahead.

He will teach you who you are

"Come and see," and as you do so your eyes will be opened and you will *really* see, perhaps for the first time, who *you* are and who *He* is. You will come to see yourself as a child of God, of divine parentage, possessed of infinite capacities to grow spiritually and become more like Him. You will come to understand that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26), and you will see all men everywhere as your brothers and all women as your sisters, with all that implies in terms of sibling responsibility. You will see that "he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33).

You will find His Church

"Come and see," and as you do so you will find His Church—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is a church directed on earth by living prophets, seers, and revelators, but its head is no mortal man, but Jesus, the Lord God Omnipotent Himself. As you "come and see," you will find a happy people—an optimistic and joyful people—who, while struggling to overcome the usual faults and foibles of humanity, yet strive to be